

Early childhood sector survey results

COVID-19 Learnings research project



Purpose of the survey

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have played a crucial role as essential workers. The sector has shown incredible resilience throughout the year, and the adjustments that services have made is a testament to their innovation and flexibility.

In September 2020, services shared their experiences with the NSW Department of Education via the COVID-19 Learnings survey.

When reflecting on these results, services may see similarities with the experiences and challenges of other services. New insights might also emerge.

Services told us that during March-June:

- That enrolments and attendance fluctuated. Not all services had seen a recovery by June.
- They were required to make substantial changes to educational programs and operational processes.
- Staff wellbeing was a significant concern, and support networks were crucial during this time.
- They appreciated the financial support and information updates from the NSW Department of Education, however asked that information sources are streamlined for future communications.

Who completed the survey



630 services completed the survey



80% of respondents were **Directors and/or Nominated Supervisors**, and 31% reported having more than one role



Half worked at **long day care** and 31% worked at preschools or mobile preschools



75% of services were located in **metropolitan areas**

“This was a huge period of change and flying by the seat of our pants. The innovation and energy levels required were huge.”



Enrolments and attendance

Enrolments

71% of services saw enrolments decrease for at least one month during March to June.

71%

Attendance

95% of services saw attendance decrease for at least one month during March to June.

95%

59% reported a decrease in March

March

June



55% of these services saw no increase by June



45% of these services saw an increase by June



Data collected during the 2020 Community Preschool Census showed that enrolments for community preschools had almost returned to pre-COVID levels by August

86% reported a decrease in March

March

June



48% of these services saw no increase by June



52% of these services saw an increase by June



Changes required to stay open

Services highlighted the aspects of their service that needed to change in order to stay open, and educate and care for children.

These are the things that services were most likely to change either substantially or completely.

“As a centre we have had to make numerous changes, some of these have truly benefited the centre and we will not be changing in the future.”

“We just talked about it as a group and everyone was included in the decision making of the new COVID-19 policies not just the director.”

“Our preschool library had book bags with both picture books and ideas books. This hands-on family learning built parenting capacity and were enjoyed by families.”



69%

Risk management & assessment

62%

Health & safety policies & procedures

55%

Financial systems



50%

Professional learning for staff

43%

Internal communications

41%

Roles & responsibilities of staff



59%

Flexibility of educational programs

43%

Learning resources

42%

Reflective practice



56%

Child hygiene education

49%

Learning via visits or excursions

48%

Transition to school

Top challenges in providing education and care

Operation and Governance



Uncertainty about financial viability



Changes to attendance numbers



Changes to funding arrangements

To inform decisions, services often sought out information from a variety of sources including the NSW Department of Education, ATO, ACECQA, CELA, CSSA and Fairworks.

“This year we did not have many new enrolments, even waiting lists reduced, as families decided not to keep their children in care.”

“Financially we only just survived.”

“We needed to redirect funds to purchase resources such as hand sanitizer and masks.”

Delivering education and care



Less face to face contact with families



Impact of JobKeeper restrictions on educators



Families under increased stress

To continue education and care, many services adapted their educational programs and resources to better support children's hygiene education and at-home learning.

“The most challenging thing was keeping the staff and families (who stuck with us) calm, safe and assured.”

“We lacked consistency of staff as we couldn't give them all the hours we wanted due to JobKeeper restrictions.”

“Services were simply in survival mode.”

Staff wellbeing

94%

Overall stress levels were higher than pre-COVID

67%

COVID-19 impacted the overall wellbeing of educators

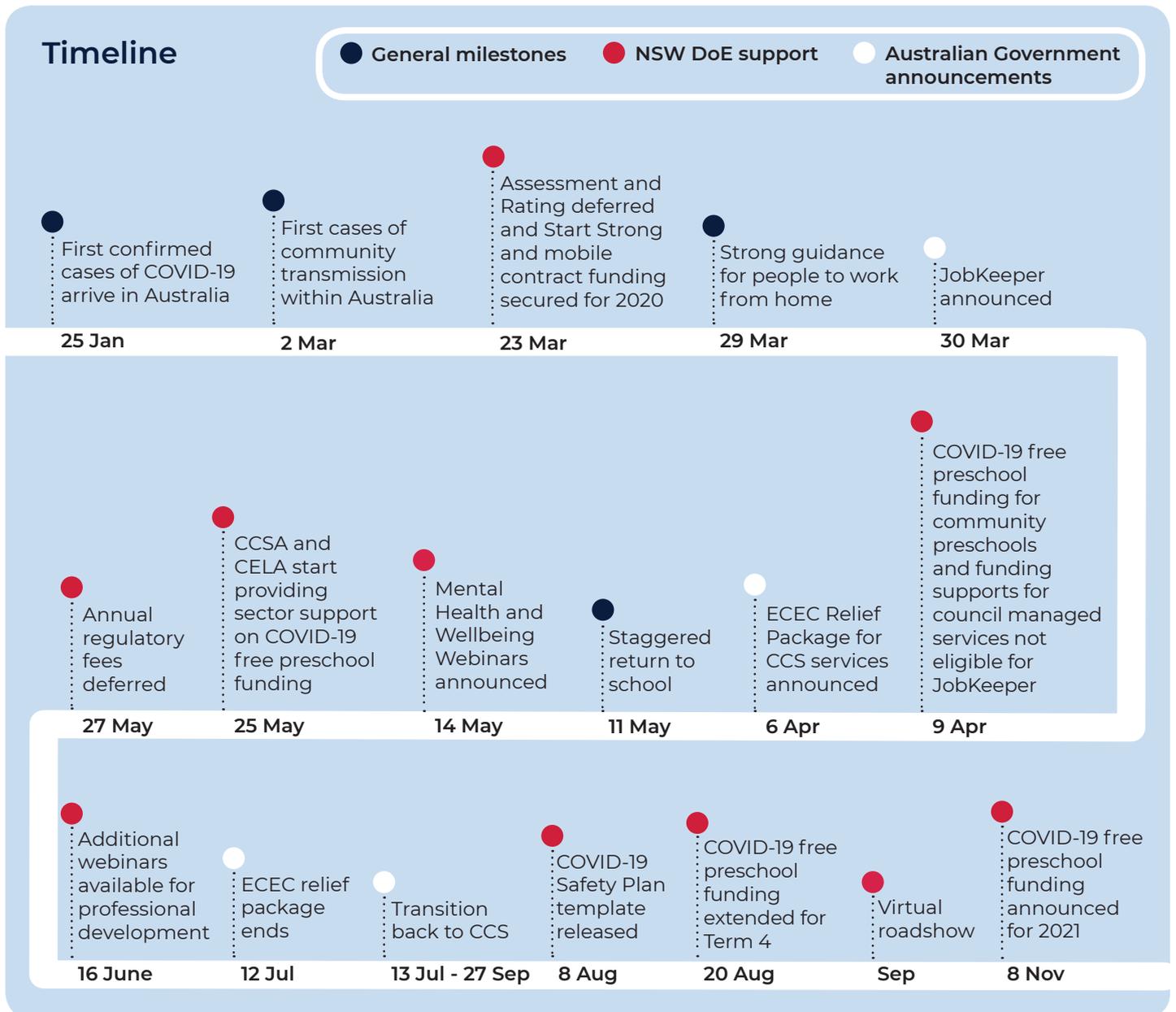
Many services reported that peer-to-peer support was crucial during March-June, and that work schedules and duties were often modified to better support staff.

“Asking someone “how are you” had more meaning to it during this period.”

“Our team came together stronger than ever and demonstrated just how much we can do to support children and families together.”

“Educators feel undervalued and vulnerable still.”

Support from NSW Department of Education



Support

Services valued:

- additional funding and JobKeeper payments
- the provision of waivers and exemptions for regulatory requirements
- the online webinars that were made available
- check-in phone calls from the NSW Department of Education.

Services suggested that in the future there is:

- greater consultation with the sector, across different service types, regarding policy and funding changes
- the provision of PPE or additional funding to purchase PPE.

“They were there if we needed them.”

“It was reassuring to talk to somebody about what we were doing to combat COVID and know that we were on the right track.”

“Being told we must remain open, but not having access to the items that would protect the children, families and educators [was a challenge].”

Information

When asked about the quality and quantity of information received from the NSW Department of Education:

- 73% of services reported the volume of information was 'about right'
- at least half of the services reported the information received from the NSW Department of Education was highly accurate, relevant and consistent with other government agencies.

Services suggested that in future, information updates:

- are distributed to the sector prior to media announcements
- are streamlined on one government website
- provide consistent definitions of key terms (e.g. essential workers)
- are supplemented with family-friendly resources.

"The health advice from government was clear but had to be broken into manageable, understandable chunks to give to over-stressed families."

"It was a time of information overload."

"I wish we had one person we could have had as a constant way of communicating for clear advice instead of having to rely on emails, news and public forums to rely on."

"It was hard to know what to say to parents and other staff members, when we weren't sure ourselves."

Next steps for COVID-19 Learnings research project

This research aims to document not only the challenges faced during the pandemic, but also the strategies that have enabled services to continue supporting the learning and development of children while operating in a COVID-19 environment.

The ECE sector survey forms part of the ECE COVID-19 Learnings research project, and will be supplemented by focus groups conducted with services and families. Further findings from this COVID-19 research project will be available in early 2021.

For more information:

Visit: [COVID-19 and early childhood education and care](#)

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